

Supercharge Your EQ With Emotional Articulation

BY LISA CHRISTEN



Learning to better define
your emotions can help to
pinpoint solutions.

I'm staring down the end of a huge TV camera lens, waiting for my interview with CNN to begin. It's a nerve-wracking situation. I have no idea what questions the news anchor will ask or how friendly she will be. I'm nervous, but what kind of nervous am I feeling? Just knowing I'm nervous isn't helpful enough to know how to make myself feel less nervous. My ability to stay calm and focused in that moment—my ability to succeed—depends heavily on my ability to know the answer to that one question.

I am an executive coach and leadership development expert, and most of my clients are surprised to learn that the best way to achieve better results (in bottom line, innovation, productivity, negotiations, you name it) lies within a unique set of data people are completely overlooking: emotions. The simple process of emotional articulation can help you unlock the power of your emotions and come away with new insights that amplify your ability to succeed.

What is emotional articulation?

Emotional articulation is the process of comparing different but related emotions to understand more clearly the precise emotions you are feeling. At the interview, what kind of nervous am I feeling—apprehensive or intimidated? Although people often use those words interchangeably with *nervous*, none of them mean the exact same thing.

If I'm feeling intimidated, I'm filled with fear based on the person across from me. I may solve for that by connecting with the news anchor in a more human way, asking about her kids or favorite places to travel for the holidays. But if I'm feeling apprehensive, it's because I'm worried that something bad may happen during the taping. To ease that pain, I could run through doomsday scenarios in my mind and figure out clever tactics for how to work my way out of a tight spot in the interview.

How I solve the problem will completely change depending on what its root cause is. That's the wisdom that emotional articulation can unlock—precise understanding of the problem creates the opportunity for precise solutions (solved correctly) the first time. Through the process of discovering the nuances between related emotions, you can unlock a whole new level of wisdom and understanding about a situation.

The link to emotional intelligence

Using emotions to be more successful in business isn't a new concept in the workplace. Daniel Goleman popularized emotional intelligence in the 1990s, and it has since become a widespread talent development topic among leaders and HR professionals. EQ focuses on the process of monitoring your own

and others' feelings and emotions and using that information to guide your actions. The scientific research clearly shows that leaders with high EQ are more effective in their roles and produce greater business results.

Emotional articulation is complementary to EQ and supercharges it in multiple ways. The key factor emotional articulation brings is a slowing down and a deeper level of emotional awareness needed to make EQ most effective.

Many individuals have learned that a key step in EQ is to identify and label their emotions, such as saying "I feel angry." But emotional labeling isn't enough—it's the equivalent of knowing the neighborhood you want to visit without knowing the street name or house number. You're angry, but are you frustrated or annoyed? Furious or enraged? Exasperated or resentful?

Deeper labeling leads to greater insights. Part of the reason many people still aren't maximizing their EQ ability is because they are overlooking the precursor to getting the most out of understanding their emotions: emotional articulation.

Another significant way emotional articulation supercharges EQ is by correcting for the most common errors individuals make as they try to apply EQ. The most common error I encounter is leaders seeing EQ as an emotions-management concept and incorrectly focusing on learning how to regulate and control their emotions. Instead of approaching emotions as a problem to be solved away, emotional articulation encourages individuals to approach emotions with a curiosity of "What new information can they tell me about the

situation?” Emotions are data points that help us find wisdom we can’t find anywhere else.

Better outcomes

The most important way that emotional articulation supercharges EQ is that it brings about better results:

- A marketing director negotiated a customized role because she realized she was envious that a colleague got a role that the marketing director is genuinely passionate about.
- A communications director started wearing noise-canceling headphones when he realized that he’s not annoyed by his colleagues; he’s irritated by the loud sounds they make around him.
- An executive assistant found a renewed way to stay positive in the office because she realized she can be appreciative of great qualities about her life without the pressure to be thankful for the extremely difficult situation she’s facing.

Using emotional articulation in small ways every day adds up to more effective energy management, better decision making, and improved problem solving. It also adds up to much more effective leadership.

Emotional articulation in five steps

To transform emotions into wisdom, you first need to face them. And to face them, you need to listen to them.

You can use the process of emotional articulation in any situation where you’re feeling lost, stuck, uncertain how to move forward, or overwhelmed by your emotions. It can be in a professional or personal setting, and it can be alone or in conjunction with considering others’ emotions.

Insider tip: Everyone is busy, so a shortcut is to follow step 2, which often provokes a small piece of wisdom that can help transform a situation.

Step 1: Label the intensity of your emotions. Initially, you can use a basic label such as *angry* to start. Then, similar to

when a doctor asks how much pain you’re feeling on a 1-to-10 scale, ask yourself: How angry am I, with 1 being mild and 10 being red-hot seething fury?

Let’s take Amira as an example. She is in a team meeting, and her manager asks if anyone has ideas for next week’s presentation. Before Amira can speak up, her co-worker, Mark, shares his idea, which is the exact idea she shared with him last week. Her face feels hot and her throat is tight as she seethes to herself and thinks, “I can’t believe he stole my idea. Why do women never get the credit they deserve?” Needless to say, Amira was high on the anger scale at the moment.

Insider tip: If you’re anywhere in the 7–10 range, you’ll likely be too emotionally charged to be able to continue with the next steps, so the better option is to find a way to get yourself lower on the scale before proceeding. In practical terms, that may mean walking away from the situation or taking some deep breaths. Once you’re lower on the scale, your brain is ready to go into emotional curiosity mode.

Step 2: Start to explore and articulate emotions. Find at least three emotions that sound like they may be what you are (or were) feeling. Though the words may sound similar, now is the chance to explore the differences among them.

Amira was feeling enraged because it felt like an injustice to all women that people like Mark weren’t supporting women to be acknowledged for their contributions. She was outraged because she was shocked that Mark would do that to her after saying he was an advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion at the company. Amira also admitted she was feeling vengeful because she thought Mark needed to “pay” for speaking over his female colleagues and seemingly taking credit for their hard work.

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Step 3: Explore additional emotions you're also feeling.

Because emotions and feelings are so complex, it is rare that you would be feeling only one emotion at a time. Quick labeling leads to exploring one emotion; emotional articulation explores at minimum two to three emotions you're feeling simultaneously.

Amira was angry, but she was also feeling sad. She was feeling angry because, it turns out, she was feeling rejected and therefore protective against getting hurt. She thought of Mark not just as colleague but also as a friend, and it felt like he completely turned his back on her in the big moments at work. That led her to understand that she felt betrayed

because she expected her friends to be loyal to and supportive of her. Because Mark hadn't lived up to her expectation of how a friend should act, she was feeling disappointed.

Insider tip: You can feel conflicting emotions at the same time. Take, for example, the feeling of bittersweet—you're both happy and sad at the same time. Be sure to explore paradoxical emotions, which are opposites that are simultaneously true.

We Are Terrible at Facing Our Emotions

You can't practice emotional articulation until you are open and ready to face your emotions. Many people are afraid of that part of the process. Why?

Emotions hurt. It is uncomfortable to feel jealous, sad, and rejected. We work hard to avoid difficult feelings.

Emotions feel inefficient. I cannot tell you the number of times I have heard someone say, "I don't have time for emotions" or "I cannot waste my energy on that." The truth is that it is more inefficient and wastes more energy to avoid them.

Our culture sets what is acceptable for us to feel. Most cultures tell boys to "man up." We have been taught that men, strong women, and leaders do not have feelings. That means many of us have not learned how to successfully manage our emotions.

We judge ourselves. If we feel something we don't like, we criticize ourselves with statements such as "You're a loser for feeling this" or "Why haven't you gotten over this? You're so sensitive." Remember, there are no bad emotions or feelings. Each one gives insight and clarity into our mental state.

We are afraid to "open that can of worms." Many clients have told me that they are afraid they will lose control if they allow themselves to begin feeling an emotion. That is where the Goldilocks practice comes in. You don't have to succumb to your feelings and let them take over. You also don't have to completely control and ignore them. In both extreme cases, the emotions control what you're doing. Instead, try this grounding practice: I am wise. Emotions help me understand what I am thinking. They are data points. I will use the information they provide to be the ultimate decision maker.

If I am sad, I cannot be happy. That is not true, as evidenced by the word *bittersweet*. You can be happy while also sad. You can be overjoyed for a friend while also envious of their growth. It is often in the paradox of our emotions where we glean the most wisdom.



Step 4: Use your articulated emotions to explore the real challenge that you need to address. Amira now realizes she's not just feeling angry and sad but rather enraged and vengeful and betrayed and rejected. She uses that information to realize that she needs to talk to Mark about their personal relationship as well as the bigger impact on women.

Step 5: Apply emotional articulation to others. Much like EQ, use emotional articulation to gain self-awareness insights on your emotions and awareness of what's happening for others.

Instead of using anger, hurt, and sadness to drive the conversation, Amira should start by being curious to explore what Mark is feeling. Is he feeling inadequate, with pressure to come up with an innovative idea that makes him sound smart in front of the boss? Is he feeling scared that he may be let go if he doesn't start performing better?

Amira using emotional articulation to explore with Mark his deeper feelings may be the best way for both sides to get to their respective root problem, solving at the root for everyone. Amira can approach Mark with wisdom and curiosity, and Mark will have the psychological safety to explore and speak openly with her.

Emotional articulation in practice

Though emotional articulation sounds easy to implement, it is anything but. As you begin diving into the process, here's some guidance to grow your skill set.

Build an emotional articulation cheat sheet. Create a list of baseline emotions with five to eight synonyms for each one. Next time you feel sad, for example, you can quickly reference your list—are you lonely, rejected, or hurt? Likewise, when you are happy, you can determine whether you are feeling joyful, fulfilled, or content.

Listen to your body. The body is wise where the rational mind doesn't have the answers. It provides signals as to what we are feeling. Chronic headaches, chest tightness, and a racing heartbeat are a few examples of ways our bodies indicate our emotional state.

Build your emotional articulation cheat sheets as a team. Work with your colleagues and direct reports to create individual cheat sheets. The more articulate you are individually, the more you can grow and succeed as a group.

Take emotions from other languages. Your native tongue may lack one of the words you need. Sanskrit, for example, has 96 words for *love*; maternal love is different than passionate love.

Be honest with yourself, always. The more truthful you are with yourself, the more wisdom you will receive. Ask often: What additional honesty do I need to add to this con-

versation? What may be painful to admit that I need to admit anyway?

Never ask why. Instead, ask what.

Why causes you to feel judged and will entice you to be defensive. Ask instead: What about this situation is causing me to feel this way? That helps your brain stay in curious mode as you explore your emotions.

Home in on your emotions

Whether we're ready to admit it to ourselves or not, emotions significantly influence our (seemingly) rational thinking. In a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world, we can't continue to try to ignore, control, regulate, or conquer our emotions—it's not a sustainable solution, nor does it produce the results we seek. Instead, we have a different option: Use our emotions as data. Emotional articulation treats emotions as the gold mine of information that they truly are, not as a problem to overcome.

Emotional articulation generates the wisdom we need to make clear decisions and move forward in a direction that is more precise, efficient, and informed. How we work with our emotions affects how successful we can be, and the best way to maximize our EQ is by starting with emotional articulation.

Back to my TV interview, as I was sitting across from the anchor, I realized that I wasn't feeling intimidated or apprehensive but uncertain. I had never done a TV interview before and didn't know what to expect. With that realization, I reminded myself of similar scenarios I had experienced and made the interview feel familiar to many other situations I had faced in the past. The result? My nervousness was gone. My confidence? Unstoppable.

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